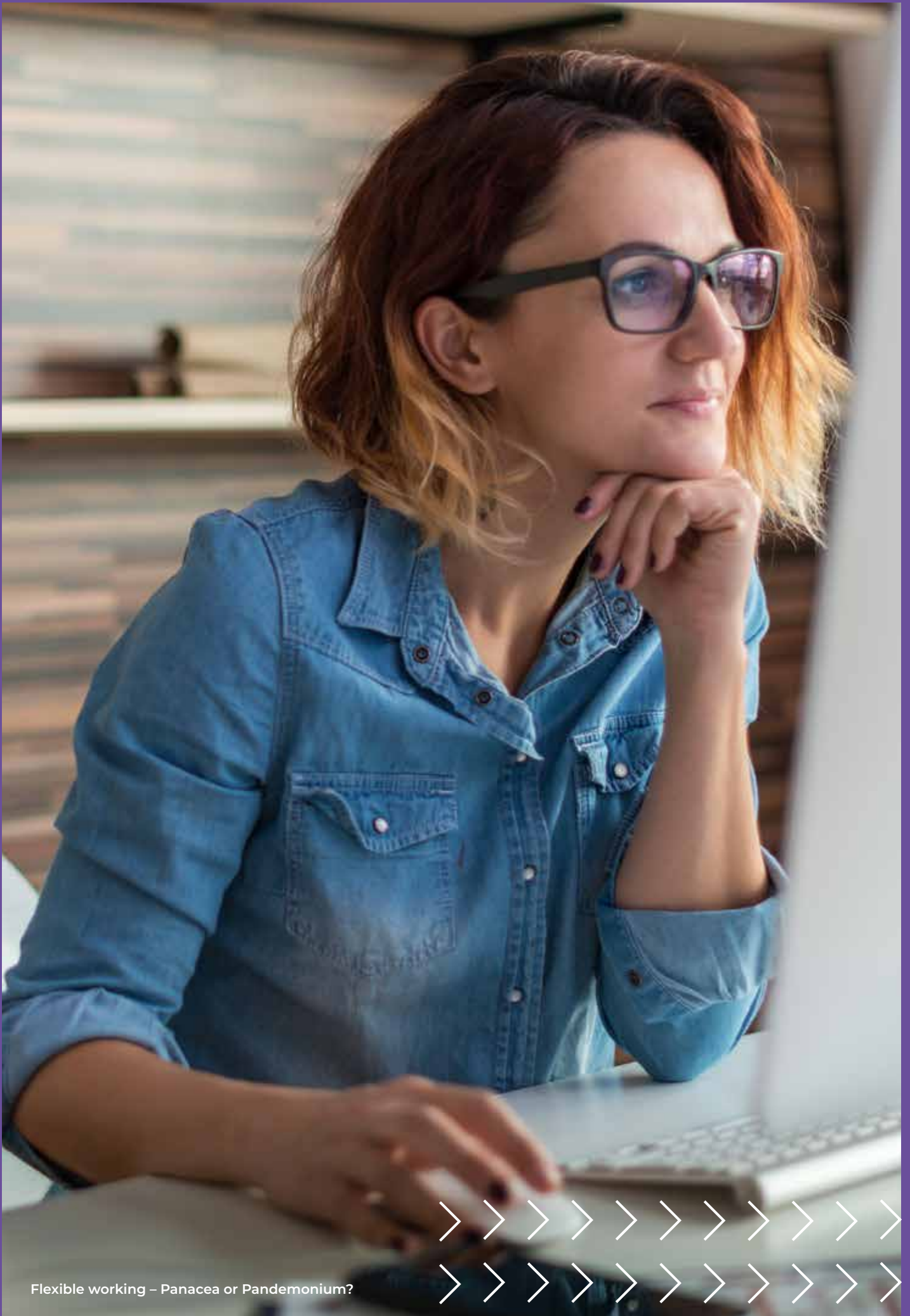


# Flexible working – Panacea or Pandemonium?

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June 2021

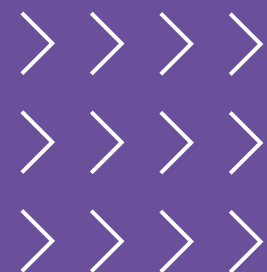


Flexible working – Panacea or Pandemonium?



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# Introduction.

One of the narratives about work that has emerged during the pandemic is that the pandemic lockdown is leading to a revolution in flexible working. However some evidence suggests that so-called flexibility of working from home is more challenging for some groups than others. So is flexibility the panacea that some make it out to be? Or is it a pandemonium for employees - a cause for upset, confusion and difficulties?

**panacea**  
/ˌpænəˈsiːə/

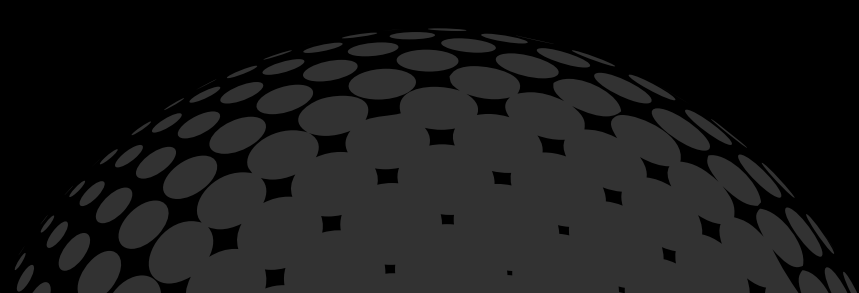
*noun*

a solution or remedy for all difficulties or diseases. "the panacea for all corporate ills"

**pandemonium**  
/ˌpændɪˈmeɪniəm/

*noun*

wild and noisy disorder or confusion; uproar. "there was complete pandemonium—everyone just panicked"





Flexible working is already enshrined in law and employees can make reasonable requests for more flexible working (<https://www.acas.org.uk/making-a-flexible-working-request>). Early in the pandemic when most jobs had shifted to home working, and relaxing rules around work time, several articles were published hailing the revolution in the workplace, promising a future where all work would be from home and a full return to the pre-pandemic office unlikely.

With most employees rapidly shifting to working from home (WFH) during the lockdowns

and the intermediate periods, one might be inclined to think that flexible working is a new phenomenon. However, as research in 2018 highlights (YouGov) only 6% of employees had 'no opportunity' for flexible working. Thus flexible working practices have been enjoyed by a large proportion of workers prior to the COVID pandemic. The difference stems from the length of time people worked from home during the lockdown and the sharing of the experience with everyone working flexibly at the same time. In relation to the pandemic the innovation within flexible working is not so much an 'IF'

but a matter of 'EXTENT'. In April 2021 coming out of the second major lockdown, the debate in organisations is how much of this 'flexibility' to retain.

This article explores the idea of flexibility in work practices and how these impact on employers/employees. It further provides some thoughts on how to flexibility can be retained. Retaining flexibility is ultimately a question for leadership of organisations during times of change, where flexibility is a clear advantage to organisational continuity, sustainability, and survival.



# Why be flexible?



While this may seem like a simple question it is fundamental to what shape flexibility in workplaces can take. The reason why organisations want to attain flexibility is to be able to 'flex' with the dynamic conditions of the market and the external environment. Closely related to the idea of flexibility is the concept of resilience. While flexibility is the feature of being able to move when force or pressure is applied, resilience refers more to the degree of ability to bounce back to an original shape and avoid breaking.

In analogy, a block of plasticine is flexible in that it can be moulded into different shapes, but it has little resilience in bouncing back. In contrast, a branch in a tree sways with the wind and bounces back to its 'normal position'. It would need a great deal of force to exceed the maximum flexibility and break the branch. Similarly, organisations can

move and sway with turbulence and other conditions without breaking or bending so out of shape that they break and are no longer viable.

Organizations rely on flow of capital and resources (material and people), and therefore flexibility is ultimately a feature of work practices that responds to changes in these flows. Flexibility enables organisations to function when there is a change and to be able to withstand disruption to changes in the flow of inputs and outputs. Thus, to understand flexibility is to recognise them as systems that rely on inputs to maintain their shape. Flexibility in this context then is about ensuring continuity during change by a) maintaining input/output flows and b) utilising resources efficiently and effectively under a situation of changing constraints.

# What do we mean by 'flexibility at work'?

## **Flexibility at work may be defined differently depending on who we ask.**

For employees it means – working in ways that allows variation in when, for how long, where, what and how to work, and the degree to which employees can manage this variation.

For organisations, the question about flexibility in working patterns emphasises whether flexible variations produce the same or better outcomes than traditional working patterns.

Some examples of flexible working patterns are:

1. Working lieu, over the weekend (7 days working week/4 day working week)
2. Working from home, workcation, office
3. Hybrid working (some days at home some in the office)
4. Choosing the tasks

5. Choosing which team or who to work with
6. How the tasks are done (digitally, face to face)

(1-3 are the most common)

Flexible organisations are those organisations that use flexibility as a tool for being more adaptable. This may include employee benefits and patterns such as home working, flexible hours, and other flexible work patterns. Flexible organisations operate more organically rather than mechanistically. This implies flatter management structures, a culture that views and embraces change as an opportunity, and that operates with reduced centralisation in decision-making.

As Deloitte (2016) highlighted most organisations have the components needed for flexibility. The downside to becoming a flexible organisation are that this can result in redundancies as the management structure is

flattened. Further flexibility might also appear via reliance on short term and agency staff. In both these cases flexibility may be detrimental to employee's job security, motivation, and commitment. The point here is that a flexible organisation may be flexible but to employees appear to present significant personal and career challenges.







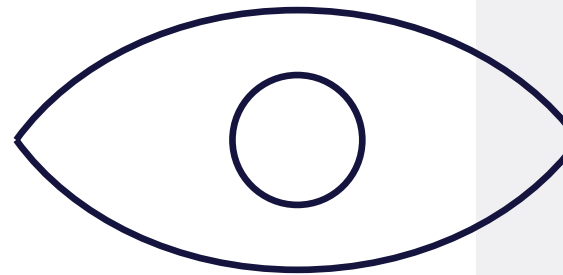
# What is flexible about working?

When considering what flexibility means in the context of workplaces several questions arise from the way organisations respond as systems.

‘What are the benefits of flexibility?’, and ‘flexible for whom?’ are the two cardinal questions. These two questions are linked depending on which benefits/outcome one focusses on. Is flexibility just a convenience for employers, or does it create improvements for employees? If so, what are the improvements, and how do these improvements apply to all staff? Are any groups of individuals affected in ways where ‘flexibility’ means difficulties and negative impact on them or others?

A further meaning of the term flexibility here does not refer so much to the way in which employees work but to what extent organisations need employees in the first instance and to what extent organisations can be flexible in the number of employees they have working for them.

To some extent zero-hour contracts and temporary positions afford organisations flexibility in maintaining productivity, while being able to modulate this depending on demand. In the case of COVID, in addition to WFH, there were three main ways in which workforce flexibility has operated: Through furloughing employees on reduced salaries, by creating full- or part-time home working arrangements, or by making part of the workforce redundant. These types of decisions are not just reactions to the immediate impact of COVID but appear to be strategies perceived to be longer term options for managing workforce flexibility and increasing operational flexibility.



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**While flexibility is the feature of being able to move when force or pressure is applied, resilience refers more to the degree of ability to bounce back to an original shape and avoid breaking.**

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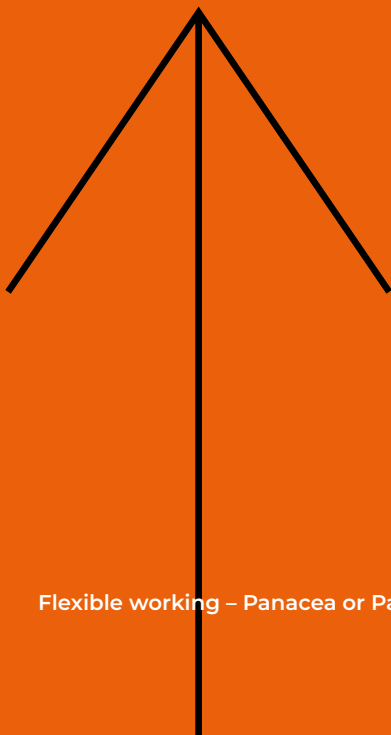


# The pandemic workplace and flexible working – impacts

**The post lock-down workplace is likely to look very different for many organisations.**

Many organisations have reduced their office space to save costs. This means there may be fewer office space available for workers who are currently WFH leading to changes in attendance patterns in the office. Current expectations are that many businesses will operate a form of hybrid working from home/office arrangement with additional flexibilities (e.g., working hours) offered. Some companies (HSBC, Google) operate policies for some groups of employees expected to work permanently

from home. WFH via digital communications platforms has meant a dramatic shift to the way in which business is done ranging from engagement with customers and clients, partners, and other stakeholders, but also in terms of business processes such as training, recruitment induction, and other HR functions. Despite the early enthusiasm for home working, the experience of flexibility created by the pandemic has brought a variety of impacts some of which are positive and some negative.



## BENEFITS OF FLEXIBILITY



### **The pandemic has become a testing ground for alternative working arrangements.**

The most significant shift in workplace practices has been the rapid change to full-time home working or WFH supported by digital communication technologies.

Attitudes to home working in organisations are likely to have changed because most staff have experienced it. The speed of adaptation to the lockdown, and the ability of organisations to function despite fears to the contrary has highlighted the fact that it can be done to a far greater extent than previously considered feasible and has not led to the loss of productivity feared.

With this shift several benefits have become apparent that benefit employees, business and the environment:

1. Improvements for staff with care responsibilities: Childcare, school runs, care for sick relatives to take time out of the day when needed
2. Known benefits of flexible work: fitting better with lifestyles, circadian rhythms, and work life-balance can enhance recruitment, attraction, retention, motivation, wellbeing and reduce sick leave.
3. Possible increases in productivity by upwards to 13% (estimated on the basis of a study by Bloom, 2015)
4. Reduction in commuting costs and time (for a 45 min commute one way over 5 days, assuming 4-week months = total of 4 work days (@7.5 hours each) saved per month, 48 work days (@7.5 hours) per year!
5. Reduction in office space and costs
6. Tax rebates for qualifying employees - utility bills
7. Improvements in environmental quality and reduction of CO2 emissions
8. Experience and insights of innovations that improve organisational functioning (e-learning, teleconferences)

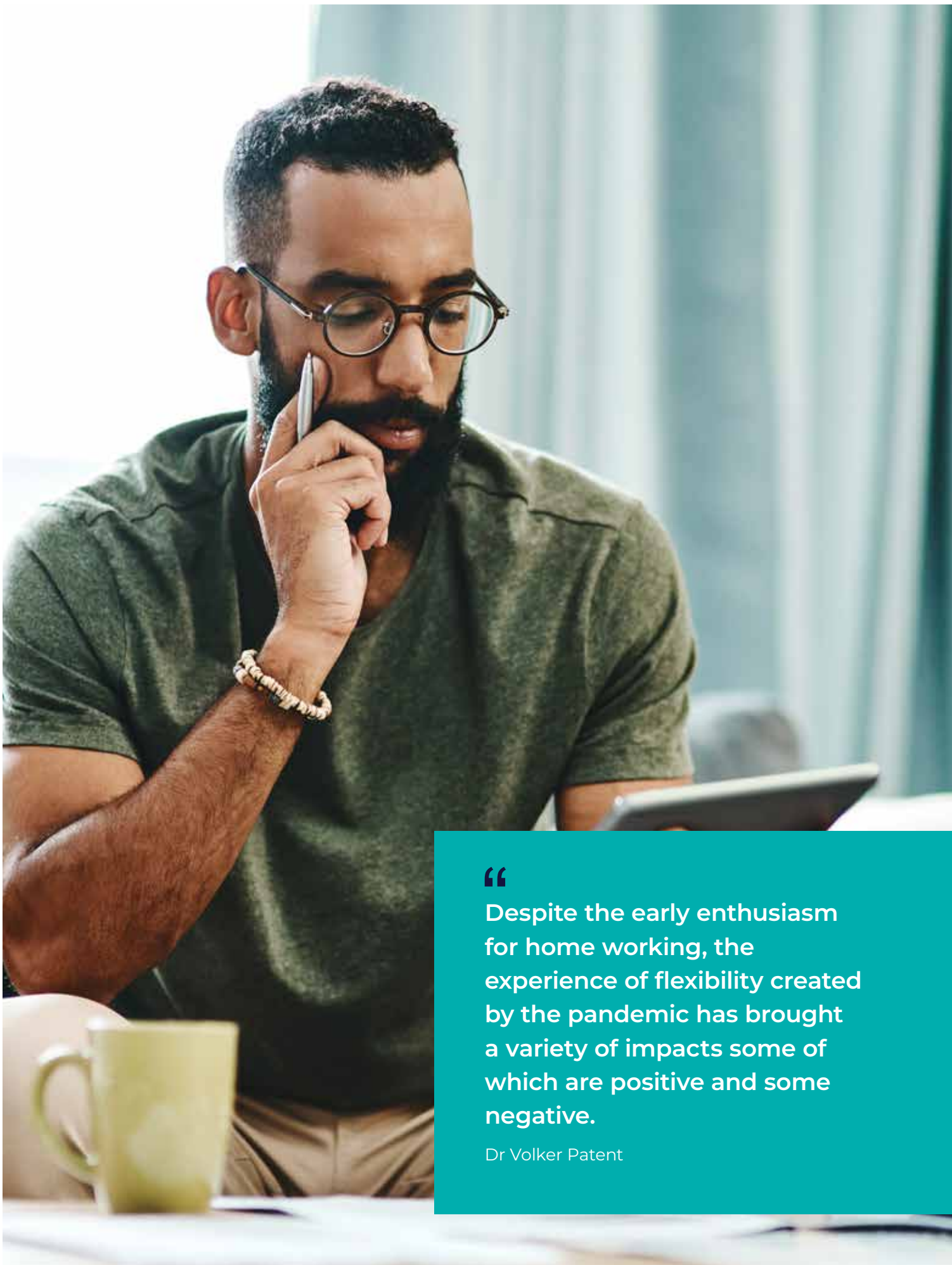


## THE DOWNSIDES OF FLEXIBLE WORKING

Using the pandemic as a test bed for different ways of working one has to be careful in not viewing perceived disadvantages as disadvantages in flexible working as such. The pandemic has brought additional pressures to bear, for example the expectation of home schooling and the limitations of digital infrastructure for example in rural location, the availability of space in modern house builds, and the inflexibility of everyone being in lockdown at the same time. How people have experienced the negative aspects of flexible working in a pandemic highlights gaps and limitations of existing services (e.g. schools, child care, construction) that would benefit from a more integrated approach to development.

Summary of impacts:

1. Isolation from others. People need contact for wellbeing
2. Inclusivity, equity. Some groups are more disadvantaged, for example people with lower socioeconomic status, income or from particular locations. People with children in school
3. Impact on mental health. Impact from lockdown isolation, burnout and separating work from home
4. Managing employees digitally
5. Information and data security
6. Impact on socialisation of new members – new hires, induction, transmission of culture
7. Monitoring and surveillance. Impact on privacy, work life boundary, trust, commitment
8. Lack of services - especially in rural communities (e.g., gyms, cafés, restaurants)
9. Technological constraints: equipment, internet infrastructure, computing & digital skill sets
10. WFH is not for everyone – negative impacts on motivation, morale
11. Exposes gaps in digital skills



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Despite the early enthusiasm for home working, the experience of flexibility created by the pandemic has brought a variety of impacts some of which are positive and some negative.

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## IMPACTS ARE TEMPORAL

How well flexibility benefits organisations and their employees, may be a question of time spent working flexibly, what the benefit of flexibility are to individual employees at different stages in their career, their life history, time of year.

In the case of the pandemic there was a common experience of the second lockdown feeling worse. This may be due to expectations created during the first lockdown for managing work, home schooling and fitting in with the new normal lockdown workplace. Also, it may be attributable to the novelty of WFH permanently having worn off at the second lockdown, and limitations of the lockdown

(e.g., social distancing, isolation, restrictions to movements, holidays, shopping) appearing more difficult over time. Applying this to work, while WFH for a continuous period for a few months may appear to be attractive, difficulties encountered over longer periods may accumulate leading to more negative perceptions over time.

Finally, now at the end of the second wave with an increase in workers returning to the office there is evidence that many workers feel anxious about returning to the office at this stage. Flexibility will be needed in allowing time for a return to work.

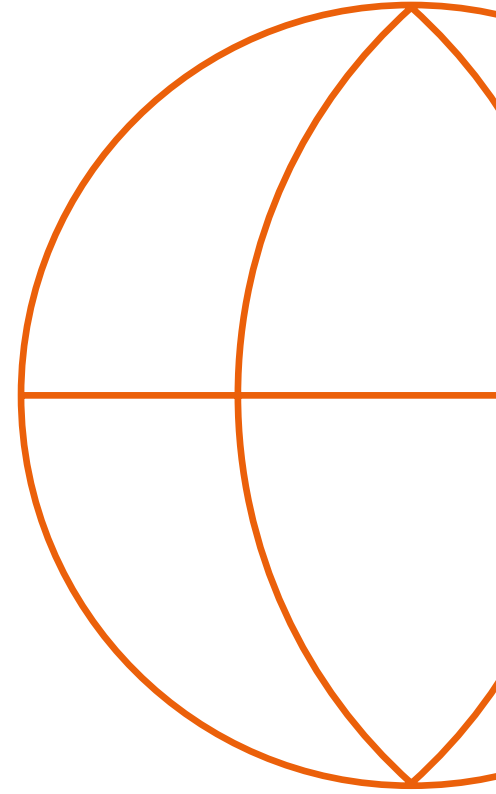
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**How well flexibility benefits organisations and their employees, may be a question of time spent working flexibly, what the benefit of flexibility are to individual employees at different stages in their career, their life history, time of year.**

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# Drivers for designing a post-pandemic workplace.



The workplace redesign in favour of flexible working is a series of design choices about how much flexibility to retain from what was achieved during the lockdown periods. There are also choices about creating flexibility that currently does not exist. This design process is driven by the questions asked. Organisations should answer these based on evidence from insights from their own staff and from available research.

- 1. Productivity:** How much gain is there in WFH/in the office?
- 2. Engagement and commitment:** How much face-to-face contact is necessary to facilitate engagement and commitment to the organisation and promote organisational identity?
- 3. Communication effectiveness:** How much F2F contact is necessary for information to flow effectively, transmit policy and cultural values, etc.?
- 4. Mental health and wellbeing:** What is the impact of flexible working on mental health? How much flexibility is good for wellbeing?
- 5. Environmental sustainability:** How does flexible working improve sustainability? What positive impacts might flexible working have on reducing carbon emissions created by workers commuting, using office space, WFH?
- 6. Learning and development:** How does flexible working drive learning in the organisation? How does it help develop other characteristics that are advantageous (e.g., independence, initiative, leadership, job satisfaction, loyalty)?
- 7. Brand awareness:** What opportunities does flexible working create for the organisation in terms of branding, outreach, and presence within local markets? How does flexible working shape the organisation's recruitment brand?
- 8. Support:** What logistic, administrative, and technical supports do employees need to work flexibly?
- 9. Equality and inclusivity:** What adverse impacts are there on disadvantaged, under-represented groups?





How can negative impacts be prevented?  
 How can flexibility be used to overcome disadvantage, for example by creating opportunities for people with disabilities, providing a better fit with commitments (e.g. childcare)

- 10. **Innovation:** How might a redesigned workplace facilitate innovation thinking
- 11. **Contingency planning:** What are the risks of further lockdowns, other disruptive events?
- 12. **Structure and culture:** How effective are current structures within the organisation and how its culture is dealing with future disruptions

In the context of workforce 'flexibility' referring to the ability to hiring decisions and types of employment offered there are several considerations:

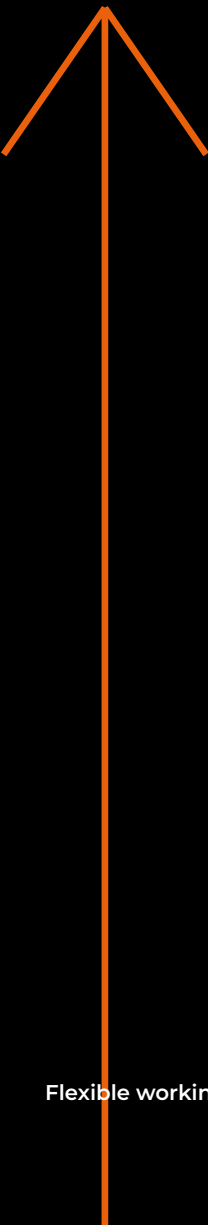
- 1. The reputational cost of 'flexibility' achieved through job losses and its impact on organisations' recruitment/HR brand.
- 2. The impact of insecure employment on productivity and well-being.

- 3. The cost of productivity per unit. Where employees worked for fewer hours but were as productive the question arises whether the working hours currently contracted are needed, for example if employees are as productive with fewer hours. 4 day working weeks.



# Looking beyond the obvious and the bigger picture.

**The pandemic has left an indelible mark on people's experience of the early 21st century that is comparable with other collective experience in history.**

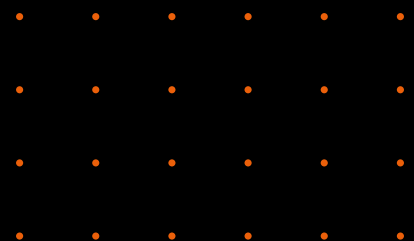


Our encounter with the pandemic must be framed in a bigger picture and a world that is marked by increased volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). It provides a glimpse into a future that has long been predicted, of continued and global and local disruption during the 21st century. The following are some of the global risks anticipated over the 21st century (OECD, 2003; Lindholm et al, 2020)

1. Future Disruption from technological change
2. Climate change
3. Further pandemics
4. Natural catastrophes
5. Socio-political and economic shocks
6. Terrorist events
7. Technological change

Flexibility provides potential advantages and benefits beyond COVID and the economic recovery process and is a key part of preparing organisations and communities for life in VUCA times.

The bigger picture demands effective risk assessment and scenario planning. However, at a more fundamental level developing the skills needed to manage and lead organisations through VUCA. This ultimately entails a closer look at business models, value systems and culture. Developing more agile business models and if needed diversifying production, distribution and other processes are vital to future business continuity and sustainability. Flexibility is a value proposition and may be in tension with other values, including stability, security and tradition, to name but a few. Negotiating this space requires leadership with broad knowledge of future trends and technologies and the vision to position an organisation within the field of possibilities that will emerge as the future. How organisations adapt, how agile they become as a result of the post pandemic redesign, and how they engage with a world of disruptive change will ultimately shape their success, as well as the future of humanity.



# Final thoughts and recommendations.

Review of the literature and our own research and experience inform the recommendations for how organisations can retain flexibility at work. Ultimately this depends on how flexibility emerged, whether it occurs through choice or simply because there are no alternatives. There are clearly a large number of things companies will do, which are impossible to outline in full. Here are a few highlights of what innovations in flexibility may produce lasting improvements in organisations based on flexibility.

1. Recognize that change is difficult – invest in strategies and approaches for dealing with the negative impact of change on wellbeing, productivity and trust, by allowing regular support and time for adjustment. Create flexibility for employees through guilt-free WFH and other forms of flexible working
2. Steer away from ‘one size fits all’ thinking about post pandemic flexible working arrangements. Design the arrangement with individuals in mind. Listen to what they need
3. Link the need to be flexible with bigger picture realities, for example climate change, CO2 emissions, and sustainability. Use the opportunity to revision
  - with these agendas in mind,
  - rather than merely recreating the past

4. Develop an effective personal coaching and mentoring framework, to enable employees to have access to independent coaching
5. Flexibility may make coordination more difficult. Approaches for protecting times for meetings might be a way to overcome gaps in availability. Using meeting recordings (video to text?), or summaries can help employees not able to attend
6. Develop digital skills to enhance employee's ability to become more effective in giving presentations online and using software for screen sharing and digital collaboration. Where this is not widely used develop new practices (for example using Microsoft teams)
7. Invest in Future Skill development (AI, digital economy, digital skills) using e-learning opportunities
8. Invest in leadership education, to help develop leaders who are capable of leading through change and have the bandwidth to vision flexibility
9. Invest in leadership coaching and mentoring to support leaders especially at times of crisis and prevent leader burnout and decision-making failure

10. If flexibility becomes a core value, make sure you walk the talk by ensuring HR policies deliver on the promise, e.g., recruitment, diversity management, appraisals, redundancy

Through our own research we became extremely aware of the challenge decision-makers in organisations face. Our survey did not study this explicitly but raised the further question about the extent of overwhelm experienced by leaders as well as their staff.

While at first may appear to be a solution for many different problems including climate change, commuting pollution, cost of office space the flexibility achieved during the pandemic may not be the panacea people hoped for. The pandemic has provided a real-world laboratory for trying out different ideas and gaining new insights into accepted practices and norm and how these function under disrupted conditions.

People need support through crises at all levels. Thus investment in flexibility is not just about arrangement's for workers to work more flexibly but to commit to supporting them through effective leadership, training, mentoring and coaching and care for their well-being and welfare. This will help create flexibility and resilience at the level of organisation and convey greater preparedness for disruption



# About the author.



## DR VOLKER PATENT

Dr Volker Patent is a Chartered Psychologist and academic researcher working in the fields of business, sustainability, community engagement and coaching. He currently holds a position as lecturer in the School of Psychology at The Open University. He obtained his PhD in 2015 from The Open University and has taught at Bedfordshire University, Putteridgebury Management Centre, and as consultant and assessment specialist in industry, medical recruitment and public engagement. His research and consultancy interests focus on trust and personality in organisations, including flexibility, creativity, spirituality, trust in individual and organisational decision-making and Human Resources.

He is currently leading work at The Open University looking at the psychological impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on individuals and businesses. His research appears in the British Journal of Social Work, in Searle & Skinner (2011) Trust in Human Resource Management, the Journal of Trust Research and he has had conference papers accepted at FINT, EAWOP ENESER, and the International Congress on Assessment Center Methods.

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The Open University  
Walton Hall  
Milton Keynes  
MK7 6AA  
United Kingdom

Email [business@open.ac.uk](mailto:business@open.ac.uk)  
Call 0300 303 0122, or +44 (0) 1908 655767 if calling from outside the UK.

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